

OPSEC for Activists

-by Elle Armageddon



OPSEC for Activists, Part 1: The Basics

****I AM NOT AN ATTORNEY; THIS IS NOT LEGAL ADVICE****

When attending a protest, there are a lot of things to keep in mind. Your experiences during a demonstration may vary based on a lot of different factors. It is generally best practice to prepare as though you may be arrested, even if the risk factor seems very low.

Some things you may want to consider include:

Lock your cell phone.

A 2014 Supreme Court Ruling states that police must obtain a warrant before searching your cell phone. While it is possible that officers may act in defiance of this order, securing your phone with a PIN, passphrase, or fingerprint can help ensure that they do not violate this ruling without your knowledge. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these three methods of securing your device: Fingerprints: provide very quick

access, and cannot be shoulder-surfed; however, if a warrant is obtained for the search of your device, you can be legally compelled to unlock it.

PIN: provides quick access, is easy to remember, and may be covered under your Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination even if a warrant is obtained; however, a 4-digit PIN can be easy to guess/crack, and may also be easy to shoulder-surf.

Passphrase: may be covered under your Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination even if a warrant is obtained, and is more difficult to guess, crack, or shoulder-surf; however, a strong passphrase may be difficult to enter if you need to access your phone quickly, and strong passphrases may also be more difficult to remember. Any of these three options is a good choice, and all three are preferable to leaving your phone unlocked. Choose the solution that works best for you, and don't worry too much about its imperfections.

Encrypt your text messages.

There are a variety of options at your disposal. Signal, Wickr, and even iMessage all provide reasonably secure messaging. The encryption all three provide means the plaintext content of your messages isn't able to be captured by IMSI catchers (aka "Stingrays") that law enforcement agencies set up to monitor protester communications. With Signal specifically, this protection extends to your phone calls as well as your text messages. As an added security measure, Signal for Android allows you to password-protect access to your text messages, and Wickr allows password protection on both the Android and iPhone platforms. The benefit of this password protection is that if you are using a fingerprint lock for your phone, law enforcement will still be legally unable to compel you to grant access to any password-protected databases, as passwords are protected under the Fifth Amendment.

Check your pockets.

Make sure you check your pockets before you head out. Be mindful of anything you may be carrying that could be construed as a weapon, and try not to bring anything you cannot bear to lose. Additionally, if you take any prescription medications, make sure to bring them with you in their original packaging. It is best to only bring a 3-day supply or so, and to leave the rest at home, in the event that you are somehow separated from your possessions and cannot get them back immediately (or at all.)

Bring a mask.

While it's entirely possible you will have no need for it, bringing a bandanna or other face-covering can help in many ways. Wearing a mask is unlikely to protect your identity in any real and meaningful ways if you are seen doing something illegal, but it may help protect you from passive recognition by local law enforcement officers, thus shielding you from being singled out for future harassment based on your political ideologies. Additionally, wearing a mask can help keep you from being spotted by employers watching news coverage of events, or to avoid being the poster child for unsavory

headlines. Photos of your face may be available long after the protest, or even the movement is over, so it is important to consider how being associated may impact you several years down the line.

Choose your clothing carefully.

Distinctive clothing can make you easy to pick out of a crowd, easy to place at the scene of a crime (even if it is not a crime you have committed,) and easy to target for police repression. While “black bloc anarchists” are frequently demonized as “violent” and “criminal,” the fact remains that black bloc is actually a tactic, not a faction, and its roots lie in protecting individuals from being targeted for repression during or after a demonstration, by cloaking everyone in a shroud of homogeneity. It is, of course, still possible to use biometrics such as height, weight, facial structure, and gait analysis to identify people in a crowd, but unremarkable attire can still help your chances significantly. It is particularly wise to avoid wearing bright colors, and also a good idea to abstain from wearing jewelry. If you have brightly-colored hair and/or tattoos, it may also be a good idea to cover these. If you are anticipating exposure to chemical agents like tear gas or pepper spray, it is important to know that while synthetic fabrics will not absorb these chemicals, and may provide a good barrier between them and your skin, they may also melt if they come into contact with something hot. Additionally, make sure whatever you’re wearing is easy to move around in (specifically in the event that you need to make a quick escape), and wear comfortable shoes.

Prepare your emergency contacts.

Find out whether there is a legal hotline that operates in your area. In many areas where such hotlines do exist, it is sometimes possible that they may not be staffed for all demonstrations, but it is always wise to write the phone number for the hotline in sharpie on your arm, as many unstaffed hotlines will also find emergency staffing in the event of arrests being made. Additionally, it is a good idea to check in with a couple trusted individuals who will not be at the demonstration; write their numbers on your arm as well, talk to them beforehand about any relevant information that you might want a legal hotline to know (prescriptions you need, whether or not you want public support, whether or not you want to be bailed out, who, if anyone, you’d like to have called, etc.) As part of this procedure, it’s also a good idea to set a check-in time with any individuals you are designating as emergency contacts; this is for a number of reasons. For one, it is always possible that you may get only one phone call in the event of arrest. It’s generally best to use this call to contact a legal hotline, but often there is a time lapse of several hours between being taken into custody, and being given your phone call. In the meantime, your emergency contacts can assume that your failure to check in means that you are unable to do so, and can start calling into the hotline, or calling people who need to be informed of your arrest (maybe you need a co-worker to cover a shift, maybe you need to let your housemates know you won’t be able to take your laundry out of the dryer or feed your dog, maybe you need your partner or neighbor to pick your child up from school.) Remember, also, that phone calls made from

jail are monitored, so be mindful of what you are saying, and make sure your contact knows not to say anything that could be used against you as well. It may also be a good idea to come up with a duress phrase, to be used in the event of extreme emergency if you've told your contacts, you do not want to be bailed out, but circumstances you may not wish to discuss over the phone have changed that.

Keep your mouth shut.

It is important to remember that you are under no obligation to answer questions posed by law enforcement officers. If you are being taken into custody, you may be required to show identification and give fingerprints, but there is no need to answer questions prying for information beyond that given by whichever form of identification you choose to use. Officers in the United States will often ask questions conversationally without first reading you your Miranda Rights, but you are under no obligation to answer them, and should refrain from doing so. Law enforcement officers are well-trained in asking questions conversationally, so you don't necessarily realize they are pumping you for information, and any information you reveal, even in response to a seemingly innocuous question, can be used to hurt you. Specifically, state that you would like to invoke your right to remain silent, ask to speak to an attorney, and say nothing else, no matter how harmless you think it may be.

Consider repression tactics.

Several of the dispersal tactics used by various law enforcement agencies may influence the choices you make prior to attending a demonstration. If police in your area use chemical agents like tear gas or pepper spray, you should refrain from wearing any oil-based makeup or contact lenses. If law enforcement uses less-lethal projectiles, you may wish to wear thicker clothing to help pad against rubber bullets and beanbag rounds. You may also want to consider bringing a gas mask and/or helmet along with you.

Never travel alone.

When going to a protest, always bring a buddy along to watch your back. Buddies should help keep each other safe from being flanked by law enforcement, being taken into custody without anyone knowing, or generally getting left behind. Having someone to watch your back can make a huge difference in how safe you are at a protest. Additionally, never depart from a protest alone; at minimum, travel using the buddy system, and whenever possible, travel in larger groups. Post-demonstration snatch-and-grab arrests by law enforcement are frequent occurrences, and traveling in a group means that at very least, there are witnesses if you are targeted. With special thanks to The Grugq for reviewing this guide.

OPSEC for Activists, Part 2: Packing for a Protest

Many protests are impromptu affairs, and you don't always have prior knowledge that one is going to happen. In some cases, you may not have time to pack a bag beforehand, and even when you do have time, you're not always thinking clearly. For these reasons (and more!) I recommend buying a cheap backpack (if you can), and using it as a dedicated protest "go kit."

My own grab-and-go kit is what I refer to as a "clean bag." This is because as important as it is to bring the things you need, it is even more important to make sure you're not bringing anything that could endanger you or your peers, or result in serious criminal charges being brought against you in the event of an arrest and search of your possessions. Packing a "clean bag" not only means that I make sure I'm not bringing anything to a protest I don't want to be caught holding, but actually that even when I'm NOT attending a protest, nothing contentious ever goes into that bag.

Things to AVOID bringing:

As I said before, what you bring is secondary in importance ONLY to what you make sure you do not bring. These are things I make sure don't go into my clean bag EVER:

- Anything sharp: no knives, no scissors (I carry a pair of trauma shears instead), nothing pointy at all.
- No weapons: don't bring baseball bats, brass knuckles, those little cat keychains, or anything else considered to be a weapon, if you can possibly avoid it.
- No "burglary tools ": lockpicks, hammers, wrenches, etc.
- Nothing explosive: No matches, no flares, etc. Being caught somewhere you're not supposed to be, carrying "incendiary devices" is pretty much never a good thing.
- No alcohol: It may seem silly to mention, but don't bring booze to a protest. At best, you get popped for public intoxication; at worst, you get accused of trying to make incendiary devices. It's not worth it.
- No drugs: Don't bring any illegal drugs at all (even weed, even where decriminalized), and never bring more than 3-days' worth of prescription medication with you. If you are bringing your prescription, make sure it is in its original packaging, complete with your legal name and dosing information on the bottle.

- No paint, spray paint, etc.: Getting caught with paint supplies during a protest where any kind of vandalism may be taking place tends to look real bad. I'm not going to tell you what to do, but I am going to say "don't get caught with paint."
- Oil-based makeup, lotion, and/or sunblock: Oil-based products can cause chemical agents like pepper spray and tear gas to stick to your skin, intensifying their effects. If you're not sure whether or not your sunblock is oil-based, you're far better off covering up in light clothing and skipping the sunblock altogether.
- Contact lenses: as oil-based sunblock can cause chemical agents to stick to your skin, contact lenses can trap pepper spray and/or tear gas against your corneas, potentially resulting in permanent blindness. As an added precaution, it is generally best to make sure that anything essential that you do bring (medication, ID, house keys, phone) stays on your immediate person rather than being put into your bag, as arrest is always a possibility, and sometimes you will be separated from your bag (or may need to abandon it to make a hasty getaway), and you want to make sure you can still take your meds and get into your house.

So, what should actually go into your bag? All kinds of things

The Essentials:

If you're planning on attending a protest, the following items are bare essentials you should bring along, in order to sustain you and keep you from being reliant on the people around you (who may or may not actually be prepared to assist anyone), and to mitigate some negative outcomes which may arise. Some of them may not seem necessary, but a majority of what seems excessive weighs next to nothing and will make a huge difference in the event of arrest or injury.

- Water: And I'm not talking a little 16.9 oz bottle, either. Water is heavy, water is important, and if you can carry a gallon of it in your pack to cover yourself and someone who may not be able to carry their own, you're not just shouldering your burden, you're taking care of others around you and alleviating the work load of organizers and medics.
- Snacks: Hanger (that's hunger, plus anger) is real. Hanger is the mind killer. Hanger is the little-death that brings total obliteration. You must feed your hanger. Let it pass over and through you, and when it has gone, you will know you were right to bring those snacks. Being hungry can take a bad situation, and make it worse. Making sure to keep your blood sugar at reasonable levels can make all the difference at a protest. You're putting your body on the line for a cause, that body needs to be fueled!

- Your ID: Plenty of people will argue with me on this one, but the fact is that if you are going to get arrested, having your ID on you may be the difference between being cited and released, and being held in custody. You probably don't need to bring your entire wallet, but it is almost always worth grabbing your ID and sticking it in your pocket (not your bag) on your way out the door.
- Prescription medication: If you are on prescription drugs of any kind, and missing a dose is going to be a problem, do yourself a favor and bring along 3-days' worth of your medicine ***IN ITS ORIGINAL PACKAGING***. Make sure the packaging has the dosing information and your legal name on it, and make sure to keep it on your person (again, in a pocket, not in your bag.)
- Emergency cash: You never know at what point you may need to beat a hasty exit. Bringing emergency cash can enable you to hop onto public transportation, dive into a taxi, or wander into a coffee shop to buy a latte and blend in with the rest of their clientele. You don't need to bring much, but it's always worth it to have a little cash on hand.
- Comfortable shoes, and clothing you can move in easily: You never know how long you'll be out, and you also never know how quickly you'll need to get away. It may also be a good idea to pack a small change of clothes in your bag, for a variety of reasons. For one, if you need to get away, ducking into a restroom and swapping out your clothes can help you disguise yourself. Additionally, if you're exposed to chemical agents like tear gas or pepper spray, you may want to change outside and put your clothes into a seal-able plastic bag before bringing them into your home.
- Emergency information: write crucial phone numbers (legal hotline, the co-worker who may need to cover your shift, the housemate who might have to feed the cat or walk the dog, a friend who might be able to bail you out, the babysitter who may need to stay late) on your arm, in permanent marker. Other things you may want to write on your arm include allergies, medical conditions that first responders should know about, etc. Arrest and injury are always possibilities at pretty much any protest, and permanent marker on skin is the best way to make sure that you never get separated from your emergency information. Additionally, in the event that emergency medical attention is needed, and you cannot advocate for yourself, having that information on your body can be extremely helpful.

Non-essentials:

There are some things which, while not entirely necessary, may well be of use if you're planning on attending a protest. A majority of these items are geared towards helping

you and the people around you, and are generally intended to extend the length of time you may be able to stay out in the streets.

- A first aid kit: Specifically, and especially gauze, duct tape, ice packs, ACE bandages, and extra water. Even if you don't know how to treat injuries, carrying extra supplies is useful if you're up for it.
- A mask: Even if you intend to be the most peaceful protester who ever lived, there are still a million excellent reasons why you may not want to have your face associated with a demonstration, and any demonstration can change in a matter of moments. Additionally, in the event of tear gas, a dampened bandanna is better protection for your lungs than nothing at all. (Isn't it a good thing you're also carrying extra water?)
- A notebook (and pen!): Jot down police officer names, street names, and times when you see shitty things happening. If you see someone being arrested, take notes on what you're seeing, and be sure to share your notes with any legal organizations doing protester support work.
- A camera: Read this, and then go out with your camera and start recording cops doing terrible things. Make sure to also read this before doing anything with your photos/videos.
- A gas mask or respirator: You probably won't need one. In most cases, even if tear gas has been deployed, as long as you're not running into it, you are probably fine just covering your mouth and leaving the immediate area. However, if you have respiratory issues, do not intend to leave a tear gas-filled area, and/or intend to walk into tear gas, you may want either a gas mask or a respirator and goggles.
- Liquid antacid and water: Because tear gas and pepper spray both burn, it can be extremely useful to carry a mixture of liquid antacid and water in a spray bottle to apply to affected areas. Make sure to use unflavored antacids, as the peppermint-flavored ones often burn a bit when applied to the eyes. Milk of magnesia is generally a best bet, as it's got a higher concentration of magnesium hydroxide (the antacid ingredient) than do most liquid antacids, and it also doesn't contain the same additives as others. A 50-50 mix of liquid antacid and water is considered ideal.
- Rescue remedy: Yeah, it's hippie as shit, but it makes some people feel calm, and it's unlikely to hurt anyone or anything.

There are plenty of other things you may or may not want to bring with you, depending on the role you intend to play at a demonstration, but it's most important to consider

what the negative ramifications of being caught with those items may be, and also important to leave anything that can't be replaced at home. If you're planning on bringing any of the items outlined in the first part of this guide, make sure they're in a separate bag, which can be easily discarded if things are beginning to look like they may lead to arrests, and try to be conscious of what traces of yourself you may be leaving behind if and when you do drop that bag.

Protests are not safe spaces, and regardless of what any organizer may tell you, the risk of police brutality and/or arrest is always there. Planning accordingly can be the difference between a cite-and-release and a felony, and can also be the difference between going home or going to the hospital. This does not mean that you should stay home, it just means that proper preparation gives you and everyone around you your best chance at creating the change you want to see in the world. For more information about how to keep yourself safe before, during, and after an action, read this.

OPSEC for Activists Part 3: Always Carry A Bandana

Mention of the potential importance of carrying a mask has been made in both OPSEC for Activists Part 1 and OPSEC for Activists Part 2. There's been brief mention of some of the reasons why it might be important to carry a mask, and this post will delve a little deeper into the subject.

There are a myriad of good reasons to wear a mask to a protest, even if you feel no guilt or shame being there. Those reasons may include:

Dragnet Surveillance: It is not uncommon for police officers to record crowds of protesters at demonstrations. While having your face appear in this footage isn't necessarily the worst thing in the world, for the sake of your privacy, it may be worth masking up anyway. Additionally, people whose faces appear in these videos are often either approached to testify against comrades in court cases, targeted for harassment by police, or accused of committing crimes due to proximity and convenience.

Child Custody Concerns: If you are a parent, it is entirely possible that your presence at protests could conceivably endanger your custody rights. If you have a vindictive ex, or other relative trying to gain custody of your children, they may cite your presence at protests as either neglect or child endangerment, depending on whether or not your children are at the demonstration with you. In light of this, it is best to wear a mask, and if you plan on bringing your children with you, you may wish to recommend that they wear masks as well.

Precarious Employment: If you are working for an employer who is either unsupportive of your political leanings, or doesn't know you're taking time off work to attend a demonstration (or deal with an arrest/court case), it may be wise to cover your face while you attend political actions. While it's true that in most states and for most jobs, you can't be fired for what you do in your time off, many employers are willing to

either find ways to work around this, or flout these rules entirely. It's not worth risking your livelihood by showing up on the evening news, when a simple bandana could save you from trouble in the first place.

Social Consequences: Perhaps you have a parent who worries too much, or a church community with varying values, or peers at work or school who might ostracize you. Perhaps you're worried about future employment opportunities, or judgement from your in-laws, or weird looks from your neighbors. In any case, even if the social consequences aren't terribly serious, it's better to wear a mask than it is to allow potential social consequences to dissuade you from going to a demonstration at all.

Fascist Creeps: It is, perhaps, no surprise that white supremacists on the internet frequently go through photos from protests in order to identify and track down people whose politics don't line up with their own. It is fairly common practice for them to circulate false rumors, attempt to get Child Protective Services involved in family situations, get people fired from their jobs, or attempt to fabricate incriminating evidence to turn over to law enforcement. Fascist creeps, as a matter of fact, represent all the threats laid out prior to their mention, as well as carrying with them the implicit threat of violence after the action is over. For the sake of protecting yourself from angry neo-Nazis, it's wise to not only mask up, but also to cover up any distinguishing marks such as tattoos, piercings, or scars as best as possible, in order to avoid being identified by the white supremacist fascists known as the "alt-right."

Stock Photos: A much less serious threat than Actual Fucking Nazis, you do not want to be identifiable as part of a protest stock photo. The likelihood of accidentally being the poster child for a super awkward headline written by hyper-conservatives isn't high, per se, but as it's easily avoidable by simply wearing a mask, the mask is probably the way to go.

Expanding the Anonymity Set: Even if you've gotten all the way through this post and don't feel the need to wear a mask, I'd like to ask you to please consider whether or not any of the threats laid out affect anyone you care about. While there are certainly a myriad of ways to identify even masked activists, if someone is willing to put in the effort, the more of us who wear masks, the less likely someone is to be spotted and have their kids taken away, or fired from their job. The more masked demonstrators there are in the streets, the less likely any one of us will be tracked down and threatened (or attacked) by right wing extremists. Even if you are not personally at risk, wearing a mask is both an important act of solidarity with our comrades, and also an effective means of helping them disappear into the masked crowd.

So have fun storming the castle, stay safe, and **Always Carry A Bandana.**

Source:

Part 1 (<http://blog.totallynotmalware.net/?p=106>)

Part 2 (<http://blog.totallynotmalware.net/?p=160>)

Part 3 (<http://blog.totallynotmalware.net/?p=286>)